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A Lecture on Our National Capital by Frederick Douglass

ANACOSTIA NEIGHBORHOOD MUSEUM SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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Editorial Note:

The original typescript of Douglass's speech is in the Douglass Collection in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress

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In the editorial treatment of the Douglass speech, the historian of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum has elected to modify Douglass's spelling and punctuation to conform with modern usage. This decision was based on the realization that the Douglass words were prepared for verbal delivery—not to be read a century later. With this exception, the text adheres to the manuscript in every other way, except as noted within the text and in Appendix A.

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Opening Statement

This small book pays in large measure an eloquent tribute to one of the most remarkable men of the nineteenth century, a man whose powerful voice still rings with lessons for our own time.

Perhaps that's why this book on Frederick Douglass's lecture on the national capital, given just over one hundred years ago, was published at this time—to inspire ourselves in light of the Douglass example in the ongoing struggle for human rights throughout the world.

The overwhelming fact in the life of Frederick Douglass, poignantly illustrated in this book, is the man's sustained productivity of thought on a subject that can hardly suffer from repetition: equal rights and human dignity.

We continue today his gallant struggle in the cause of equality and humanity. And this book reminds us that Frederick Douglass remains the great teacher of lessons learned and those yet to be fulfilled.

JAMES JOSEPH *Under Secretary U.S. Department of the Interior*

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Foreword

“All signs indicate that the national capital will ultimately become one of the most desirable cities for residence, in the world.”

Written more than one hundred years ago, these words are just as applicable today as when spoken by Frederick Douglass, first in 1875 “in the city of Washington,” and again

in 1877 at the invitation of “a number of citizens of Baltimore to deliver a lecture in that city. . . .”

Douglass lived within sight of the Capitol building itself, so one may reasonably assume that he was in a contemplative mood as he approached the task of preparing a lecture on “Our National Capital.” One might also conjecture that Frederick Douglass, on the eve of the nation's centennial observance, consciously assessed the city's virtues and vices in an effort to measure the progress made by the nation during his own lifetime, which spanned most of the nineteenth century.

As the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., is a young city when compared with other capital cities around the world. Yet, it has the distinction of being the only capital city planned and built as a capital city. However, many of us who were born here are not aware of the historical significance of this place we call home, while residents of the surrounding suburban communities are heard many times referring to Washington as their home. They feel good about this place and want everyone to know that they are from a desirable city.

The words of praise or condemnation about our city which appear in this address were uttered by a man who spent the formative years of his life as a slave in nearby Talbot County, Maryland. The advantages of books and schools and of parents were not his to enjoy, and by all speculative estimates his name was destined for the rolls of oblivion, like so many in the long cavalcade before him. But this man, Douglass, struggled and toiled to better his own condition in life, and in so doing left a lasting and imperishable legacy of good deeds that, if read and understood, shall serve to inspire people yet unborn.

In the September 1953 issue of *Ebony* magazine, Mrs. Mary Church Terrell, a friend of Frederick Douglass and herself a long-time advocate of human rights, observed that “the passing of the years, far from diminishing his importance, has made Douglass an even greater figure in this country's history.”

Today, Frederick Douglass still points the way. His keen insights into the great issues of the day; his eloquence and prowess as an orator; his power of observation and assessment; and his demands for excellence, continue to excite the imagination, intellect, and spirit of those who encounter him. A man for all 6 seasons, Douglass still illuminates our lives and remains a constant shining light in our midst.

As expressed by Dr. Booker T. Washington in the introduction to his biography *Frederick Douglass* published in 1908, “No Negro can read and study the life of Frederick Douglass without deriving from it [the] courage to look up and forward.” Continuing, Washington reminds us that “while it is true that Frederick Douglass would have been a notable character in any period, it is also true that in the life of hardly any other man was there comprehended so great a variety of incidents of what is perhaps the most memorable epoch in our history.”

Others have studied Frederick Douglass and have not found him wanting. In the foreword to the Centenary Memorial Subscribers' Edition of the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,* published to commemorate “the One Hundredth Anniversary of Douglass' first Public Appearance in the Cause of Emancipation,” Dr. Alain Leroy Locke, America's first black Rhodes scholar, noted that: It is only fair and right to measure Douglass, with his militant courage and unequivocal values, against the yardstick, not of a reactionary generation, but of all times. It is thus evident why in the intervening years Douglass has grown in stature and significance, and why he promises to become a paramount hero for Negro youth today.

Locke tells us that “this can happen most sanely and effectively if today we read or re-read Douglass in his own crisp and graphic words,” lest he be minimized or maximized by those who would interpret him. There is manliness, truth, and candor in the real Douglass. He was no romanticized or mythical hero; his great resounding voice was a fine-tuned instrument effectively employed in the struggle for human decency and human rights. Douglass was not without his detractors, and one finds both contradictions and

consistency in his life and writings, as well as interesting paradoxes. As a young man Douglass so hated slavery that he “unloosed his chains,” yet as an aging Sage, he could, with tears in his eyes, visit his old master on his death-bed and forgive him his past transgressions.

Written by Alain Locke in 1941, the following thought still resounds with a ring of truth today and is testimony to the enduring quality of Douglass: Obviously there is much in Douglass, both of word and deed, which is vital and relevant to this present generation and to our world today. Racially and nationally we still need the effective reenforcement of his career and personality. For youth, in its time of stress and testing crisis, needs and can benefit by the inspiring example of a crusading and uncompromising equalitarian.

Frederick Douglass's words are not empty, shallow, or meaningless. The echo and resonance of this challenging speech still reverberate upon the landscape of a city called upon to live up to its greatness. His skillful use of praise and sarcasm was meant to shake us from our complacency. A master orator, Douglass took the city to task and bombed it with verbal missiles and cannons. A man correct in both his public and private dealings, he unleashed his wrath upon those who would revile our government and the nation's capital. It was not his intention to make us feel comfortable; but his ire came from caring. Not fearing to say what must be said, he served his people and his country well.

We of this generation might ask ourselves what it is that causes some people to use their gifts and talents effectively in the struggle for human rights, while 7 others, with great timidity, are caught unawares, unprepared, and afraid.

It is hoped that this speech, which is as timely in 1978 as when delivered in 1877, will inspire Washingtonians to study the history of their city and work unceasingly and untiringly to make it “one of the most desirable cities for residence, in the world.”

JOHN R. KINARD Director, Anacostia Neighborhood Museum *February 1978*

Introduction

“Washington is a great city, the capital of a great nation, and I think it will laugh at the ridiculous attempt to rouse it to a point of furious hostility to me for anything said in my Baltimore lecture.” These words of Frederick Douglass were part of a long letter published in the Washington *Evening Star* on May 12, 1877, a letter designed to combat the storm of criticism resulting from a lecture, “Our National Capital,” which he had delivered in Baltimore four days earlier.

For this lecture, as Douglass put it, “I got myself pretty roughly handled,” with many angry demands that he be removed from his recently appointed post as marshal of the District of Columbia. The things that Douglass said about Washington were things everyone knew to be true, editorialized *The New York Times* on June 1, 1877, as the uproar began to die down. “They have been said about Washington a great many times before, but never by a man whose skin was dark-colored, and who had been appointed to office in the District.”

Any speech by Frederick Douglass was bound to be hard-hitting; when did Douglass ever hold his fire? But there was far more to Douglass than biting criticism, and his discourse on the city of Washington reveals the man in all his powers—his insights into human behavior, his wide-ranging knowledge of public affairs, his skill in organizing his thoughts, and his remarkable facility with the language.

We of today are denied the opportunity of hearing Douglass deliver this address. Unlike his Baltimore audience of a century ago, we cannot spend an unforgettable hour and a half listening to one of the great American orators of the nineteenth century—to hear the rolling thunder of his voice, to note his deep-set, flashing eyes, and to gaze upon one who had planned his life to be, as he put it, “a terror to evil-doers.”

Although we cannot hear Douglass speak these words, we may still savor them in transcript. An address by Douglass wears well, as this analysis of the city of Washington will demonstrate. We may note, for example, its careful three-part organization: first an examination of Washington's assets as the seat of government; followed by a delineation of its drawbacks for such a role; then a concluding evaluation, touched off with an optimistic view as to the future. If Douglass is highly critical of Washington as the nation's capital, he also exhibits a love of country, defining and defending patriotism, and asserting that the people of the United States have “the best government in the world.”

Throughout this address, perhaps the longest he ever gave, Douglass demonstrates this sense of balance, of seeing things in the round. If at one point in Washington's history “its respect for the rights of man was bounded by the 9 white line,” Douglass acknowledges that by 1877 the District had become one of the most enlightened and liberal cities in the nation as far as blacks were concerned. If Douglas could inveigh against Washington for its shortcomings, he also had a strong sense of civic pride and concern. He had a feel for the physical charm and beauty of the city, particularly for its displays of spouting water. “Numerous fountains,” he wrote, “fed by the broad Potomac, send their pure, bright, crystal spray high in the summer sunlight, clothing the grassy lawns and shrubbery around them, with more than emerald beauty.” (Oddly enough, Douglass failed to mention Benjamin Banneker's role in the laying out of the city.)

His reflective turn of mind led Douglass to extend his criticisms beyond the rich and powerful. “Human nature,” ran one passage in his lecture, “is proud and perverse among the low as well as among the high.” It is to be noted, too, that if Douglass never bit his tongue in speaking of others, he did not spare himself. Indeed he opens his lecture with a semi-humorous account of an orator who, appearing before a Boston audience, “makes a tremendous impression upon himself,” but who puts his audience to sleep. The story reaches its climax when the said orator turns out to be none other than Douglass himself.*

* See Appendix A

Douglass was a careful and perceptive observer, and in this speech his analysis of politicians, bureaucrats, lobbyists, the well-to-do, and the poor, makes us nod in approval as we recognize the striking similarities between the behavior patterns of his day and our day. For it was the great gift of Frederick Douglass to catch the spirit that animated his age, and to transmit it to succeeding ages. Hence to read his thoughtful remarks on our national capital of a century ago is to realize anew that “the past is not dead; it is not even past.” The title, “The Sage of Anacostia,” sits well upon the author of such an address.

BENJAMIN QUARLES Professor of History Morgan State University *November 1977*

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A Lecture on Our National Capital

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

It is not from any sense of my superior knowledge of men and things at the National Capital, or from any decided impression of your special destitution of such knowledge, that I venture to lecture upon the subject announced for this evening. On the contrary, the selection may be best explained upon the principle that large bodies attract small ones, and in the comparison between the large and the small, you are the large and I am the small. You may know much, and I may know little. Nevertheless, having spent in Washington several of the most eventful, stormy, and perilous years of the Republic; having seen it both during and since the late tremendous war; having been a deeply interested spectator and student of passing events; and being compelled by my position and antecedents to view men and things from a peculiar point of observation, and knowing, too, that truth is a very large and many-sided matter, and that it requires a very large variety of men, and women, to tell it, I have naturally enough thought it might be well for me to tell my story about our National Capital.

Library of Congress

There is another reason for the selection, not, perhaps, so creditable as the one already stated, yet equally true: I was in want of a subject, and in want of one that is popular.

I have found that subjects, remote from public thought and feeling, even if not somewhat remote from the thought and feeling of the speaker himself, cannot easily be made very interesting.

Popular lectures, or lectures to be made popular, must be upon popular subjects, those in which the public have a warm and vital interest.

Several years ago it was my good or ill fortune to know a lecturer who somewhat disasterously set this law at defiance. From some cause or other, perhaps a desire to do something out of the common way, something high, grand, and surprising, or perhaps from a mere paroxysm of self-confidence in which he was made to feel himself equal to any achievement, he ventured before a brilliant Boston audience (all things in Boston are brilliant) clad in an intellectual armor which was evidently neither made, measured, nor meant for him, nor he for it.

He took for his theme the name of a great historical character, a man who lived and wrought in a remote age and country, a real hero in his day Frederick Douglass. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.* 12 and generation, and one who had made the friends of civil and religious liberty immensely his debtor; but, sublime and glorious as was the theme, it was impossible for the speaker to overcome the barriers of time and space. For the life of him, he could not bring the subject home to his audience.

He labored hard and really did his best; he was historical, philosophical, reformatory, and belletristical; but all to no purpose. He made a tremendous impression upon himself, but his audience escaped entirely. In spite of his highest flights of oratory, the lights would burn dimly, the air would grow heavy, and somnolency would creep over the weary

crowd. About the most lively and most cheerful moment of the whole of this intellectual entertainment was when the orator meekly bowed and retired from the platform.*

* See Appendix A

Fortunate or unfortunate as I may be in my selection of a subject this evening, it has at least the advantage of popularity. Whatever may be the character of some things said and done at the National Capital, the place itself, for a variety of reasons, some good and some bad, has powerful attractions and is wonderfully popular in the sense that everybody knows a great deal about it and wants to know a great deal more.

Of all the broad columns in the morning papers, the one containing news from Washington is, naturally enough, the most generally sought, if not the most carefully read.

Merchants, bankers, brokers, and other businessmen may have their special corners and columns which they eagerly scan, but the Washington column is a column for the whole nation. It is the point from which we learn not only what storms are in the sky, and where they will be likely to fall, but what social earthquakes slumber beneath and are likely to rock and rive the political world, and it would be well for us if we could only learn at the same time how to avoid the disaster attending both. Interesting from the first as the honored seat of the national government, Washington should now be more interesting than ever. There is better reason than ever for such interest. At no time in its previous history has it been so truly as now, the capital of the whole nation.

The vast and wonderful revolution which has taken place in the conditions and relations of the American people, is nowhere more visible, striking, and complete, than in Washington. A man who knew the place in the days of Clay,1 Calhoun,2 and Webster,3 would hardly know it now. Outside of the public buildings, some of which have been vastly changed and improved, all the older landmarks of the city have been obscured or have wholly disappeared. The spade, the plough, and the pick-ax of the Freedmen have changed the appearance of the face of the earth upon which the city stands. Hills have been leveled,

valleys filled up, canals, gullies, ditches, and other hiding places of putridity and pestilence, have been arched, drained, and purified, and their neighborhood made healthy, sweet, and habitable.

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John Caldwell Calhoun, Senator from South Carolina. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

Daniel Webster, statesman from New England. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

The old repulsive marketplaces, so long a disfigurement to the city and a disgrace to the civilization of the age, have been swept away and replaced by imposing and beautiful structures, in keeping with the spirit of progress.

Magnificent thoroughfares, for which Washington has no rival, have been lately graded, paved, and parked, and richly adorned on either side with beautiful and flourishing shade trees. The Capitol grounds, seventy acres in extent (full thirty acres larger than the late Horace Greeley4 allowed for the model farm), formerly a picture of neglect and ugliness, have been touched by the genius of Frederick Law Olmsted5 and clothed with the entrancing power of landscape beauty.

Splendid mansions of every variety of modern architecture have been erected in all parts of the city, as if by enchantment.

In comparison with these elegant dwellings, those great buildings of twenty years ago look stunted, gloomy, and old-fashioned and out of place.

As you move around the city you will see that outlying tracts of land, once the broad receptacles of dead animals and where no better scavengers appeared than the buzzards or the crows, have been reclaimed and added to the city and made to blossom like the rose.

The magnificent distances of old have been mastered by street railways 14 in all directions. New lines of them have been built, old ones extended, and now splendid chariots have been added to the conveniences of the people in getting from one part of the city to the other.

Ample public grounds, parks, and reservations of every shape, size, and situation, have been expensively enclosed, handsomely laid out, and covered with trees, shrubs, and flowers.

One of the most charming features of the capital city, both in its numerous public and private grounds, is in the abundance and display of pure water. Numerous fountains, fed by the broad Potomac, send their pure, bright, crystal spray high in the summer sunlight, clothing the

West front of the Capitol and grounds as they appeared in 1874, when Olmsted's work was under way. *Courtesy of the Office of the Architect of the Capitol.*

Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of the Capitol grounds. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

Olmsted's plan for the Capitol grounds, *Courtesy of the Office of the Architect of the Capitol.*

grassy laws and shrubbery around them with more than emerald beauty.

Even the lands surrounding that long-neglected and still-unfinished monument erected to the memory of George Washington, have been, in the last year or two, greatly improved and beautified, while the monument itself, in its desolate incompleteness, is a standing reproach to the gratitude of the Republic.6

I look forward to the day when this reproach shall be removed, as many others have been. More has been accomplished in this respect by the spirit of freedom in Washington during the last three years than during the preceding thirty years of the slave power.

The Center Market, seen here in the background, was located between Seventh and Ninth Streets, N.W., in the area now occupied by the National Archives building. The old market burned in 1870; the new Center Market opened in 1872. *Courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.*

An example of one of the finest homes in the city, “Stewart's Castle” was built in 1873. *Courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.*

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Lincoln Park, located on Massachusetts Avenue, N.E., between Eleventh and Thirteenth Streets, was developed around 1870. In 1876, Frederick Douglass spoke at the unveiling of the statue in the center of the park—a work by Thomas Ball which shows Lincoln with Archer Alexander, a former slave. The statue was paid for with the contributions of emancipated blacks. *Courtesy of the National Park Service.*

Under the new dispensation of liberty, the Federal City has been lifted out of more than sixty years of mud and mire.

It has broken up the inaction and stagnation, snapped the iron chain of conservatism which anchored the city to a barbarous past, banished miasma, improved the value of property, increased the population, and opened for the city a future of glory undreamed of by its people fifteen years ago.

The marvelous transformation of Washington has met the disapproval of a certain class of our citizens. Like a historical character of earlier times who had much to do with the money bag, they think the treasure might have been expended more wisely in other directions.

The better judgment of the country, however, is, that we cannot easily do too much to improve the character and beautify the appearance of Washington. Regard for the welfare, fame, and fortune of the National Capital should be commensurate with the ever-increasing power, greatness, and glory of the nation itself.

With the best government in the world, the people of the United States should have a national capital inferior to that of no other nation in 17 the world. The sentiment which would improve, beautify, and exalt the city of Washington is neither weak, unwise, nor transient. It is a natural and necessary outgrowth of a healthy, manly, and self-respecting patriotism.

To those very broad and high people who are insensible to national boundaries, and are incapable of any special feeling of country, considerations of this sort have little weight. There are doubtless men of this description in every community, some of them possibly very good men, the best of the race, men whose country is the world and whose countrymen are all mankind, but these are exceptional men.

Alexander R. (“Boss”) Shepherd (1835–1902) was responsible for many of the improvements noted by Douglass in his lecture. As vice president of the Board of Public Works and later as governor of the District of Columbia, “Boss” Shepherd made sweeping changes that bankrupted the city. Congress took over the debt and in the process put the District back under its authority for the next hundred years. *Courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.*

The unfinished Washington Monument. *Courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.*

As a general rule it will be found that a man who cares nothing for the character and credit of his country, will care about as little for his own character and credit.

Of course there is a great of cant about patriotism, as there is about many other good things in the world. “My country, however bounded,” said Winthrop,7 when we were about

to take forcible possession of Texas, and thus rob a neighboring republic of her rightful possession. “My country, right or wrong,”8 says the demagogue, when he knows his 18 country is clearly in the wrong. But whatever may be the cant and extravagance which gains currency under the garb of patriotism, the sentiment itself is pure, natural, and noble, as real as iron or the flintiest granite, and more enduring than granite or iron.

The precise quality and value of this feeling, I shall not undertake to analyze and determine. It may not be the highest and best of which the human soul is capable; it may not be so noble as gratitude, nor so pure as love of woman; not so sacred as regard for truth, not so divine as a sense of the Infinite; but like all these, and more, it is genuine, human, instructive, and capable of performing an important work in the onward progress of the world. It is as natural to us as to walk the earth, breathe the air, and view the solemn sky.

In this, the centennial year of American independence, but little need be said in proof or in praise of patriotism. The air is full and fragrant with her achievement. In every direction her deeds and her heroes are marshalled before us in all the panoramic splendor with which poetry and eloquence can paint them.

We need not go back to the soul-stirring and soul-trying events of the Revolution of 1776. Examples are near us. While we remember the smoke of battle as it lingers over the Wilderness;9 while we remember the impatient cry of “On to Richmond!”10 and the enthusiastic devotion to the Union which gave the first-born of every loyal household to the altar of country and liberty; while we remember the fresh graves of more than a quarter of a million of the youth and flower of the nation; while we remember the thousands of maimed and mutilated soldiers who offered their limbs and their lives in exchange for the safety and freedom of their country, no wordy tribute to the quality and value of patriotism is required at my unskilled hands. She speaks for herself. Her trophies and her monuments are all around us. Her witnesses are a free country, a united country, and emancipated millions forever redeemed from the horror of slavery and chains.

But I return to Washington. Great cities, like great men, have their distinctive, individual characters and qualities. While all have something in common, each has something peculiar to itself, and each makes its own peculiar impression on the outside world. New York is not Boston, nor is Boston Philadelphia; and neither the one nor the other is Washington.

New York, Boston, and Philadelphia stand for what they are, vast assemblages of wealth and power; seats of commerce, that touch us on the cold, calculating, and flinty side of our nature.

The case is somewhat otherwise with Washington. We naturally view all her majestic features through the mellow haze of poetry and patriotism. It is the living center of our social as well as of our political civilization and is incorporated with all our national thoughts and feelings. In the remotest sections of the Republic, in the most distant quarters of the globe, whether amid the splendors of Europe or the barbarism of Africa; wherever business or pleasure may carry him, an 19 American citizen worthy of the name feels himself largely identified with the capital of his nation. He cannot separate himself from her. He is proud of all which may cover her name with glory and renown or grieves for that which shadows her name with shame and reproach. His solicitude for her character and good name is analogous to that which an honorable men feels, and ought to feel, for the character and good name of his own town, neighborhood, and family. The poor man should feel rich and the rich man should feel richer by reason of his relationship to it and his ownership in it, for the capital of the nation belongs alike to all.

I once heard Daniel Webster, standing with uncounted thousands of American citizens before him, at the base of [the] Bunker Hill Monument, surveying the lofty shaft from ground to sky, say in a voice and manner that thrilled me, “Welcome. Welcome. For wherever else you may be strangers, ye are at home here.”11

So happily we may now all say of Washington, “Wherever the American citizen may be a stranger, he is at home here.”

Elsewhere he may be a citizen of a state no larger than Delaware; here he is a citizen of a great nation. Elsewhere he belongs to a section, but here he belongs to the whole country and the whole country belongs to him. No American now has a skin too dark to call Washington his home, and no American now has a skin so white and a heart so black as to deny him that right. Under the majestic dome of the American Capitol, as truly as under the broad blue sky of heaven, men of all races, colors, and conditions may now stand in equal freedom, thrilled with the sentiment of equal citizenship and common country. The wealth, beauty, and magnificence which, if seen elsewhere, might oppress the lowly with a sad sense of their personal insignificance, seen here, ennoble them to their own eyes and are felt to be only fit and proper to the capital of a great nation.

In passing through the city from day to day, and contrasting the present with the past, I often reflect that an American citizen cannot do a better thing for himself or for his country than to visit Washington at least once in his lifetime.

He need not go there as a Mohammedan goes to Mecca, nor as a Catholic goes to Rome, nor as an Israelite goes to Jerusalem, but he should go in the spirit of intelligent patriotism, the better to appreciate the value of his country and the excellence of free institutions.

Washington should loom before our mental vision, not merely as an assemblage of magnificent public buildings and a profusion of fine and fashionable people; not merely as the seat of national power and greatness; not merely as the fortunate place where the nation's great men assemble from year to year to shape the policy, enact the laws, and control the destiny of the Republic; not merely as the place where the diplomatic skill and learning of the old world meet and measure themselves in debate with those of the new, but, as all that, and more: We should contemplate it with much the same feeling with which we contemplate 20 the national flag itself; as the Star-Spangled Banner, with not one star

missing or dimmed; a glorious symbol of civil and religious liberty, expressive of the best ideas and institutions yet devised by the wit of man.

There is abroad a feeling strongly opposed to centralization and a centralizing tendency. It cannot be denied that Washington has some such tendency, but this is inevitable. It cannot be otherwise, and it be the seat of the national government. Every capital has this national and centralizing tendency. In Europe all roads lead to Rome. A man's heart is with his treasure, and the heart of a nation is the heart of an individual multiplied. It is more than a figure of speech when it is said that Paris is France, and that London is England. While all the high functions of the national government have their seat and center in Washington, the mind and heart of the nation will and must be drawn thither and will magnify its importance. In this natural and necessary tendency, I see no just cause of alarm. Neither the government nor the people are likely to suffer by it. We are a republic, not a despotism. With universal suffrage in their hands the people have all power, and they may be safely trusted to manage both the centripetal and centrifugal forces of our complex system of government. The broad open sea, fanned by the winds of heaven, is about as pure as the muddy streams that flow into it. The many are about as good as are the few. The whole is about as strong as a part, and the nation as a whole will be about as wise and just as the individual states.

If comparison shall be made between centralization and sectionalism, and each shall be judged by its fruits, centralization will appear the least pernicious of the two doctrines. The American people have suffered far less from the former than from the latter. One tends to unity and nationality, and the other tends to disorganization and disorder. The one would adorn and exalt the National Capital, and the other would hand it over to neglect and dilapidation.

Thus far I have given you thoughts concerning Washington and have told in what regard the national metropolis should be held by the American people. I have to speak now more particularly of the fact of Washington: of its character and composition; of its past, present,

and future. It will be easily seen that the contemplation of the city is one thing, and the city itself is quite another thing; and that there may be a wide difference between what it ought to be, and what it may be in reality, and what it may be in the reforming hand of the future.

In regard to the character and influence of Washington, we have to deal with some broad and striking contradictions. It is natural to assume that the place where good men assemble must itself be good; that the presence of good men will invest with goodness the place where they congregate.

Adorned by the presence of the highest functionaries of the nation, by the chosen men of every section of our common country; the theater of American wisdom, law, and learning; the home of the chief magistrate of the Republic; the highest forum of American eloquence; the point from which the whole American press receives its daily inspiration; it should 21 be as a city set upon a hill, a source of light, health, and beauty to all who come within its golden radiance.

Such would seem to be the general rule and the just expectation. Unhappily, general rules sometimes have many exceptions. Justice is not always found on the bench, nor purity in the pulpit, nor saints at the altar. It will not do to assume for Washington either moral or material preeminence over other cities of the Union. On the contrary, Washington, as compared with many other parts of the country, has been, and still is, a most disgraceful and scandalous contradiction to the march of civilization.

Of course it is easy to be wise after experience, and it may seem weak to display wisdom concerning the act of locating the National Capital where it now stands, but it is a natural reflection, and a part of the subject, and cannot well be omitted.

Looking at the influence exerted by simple local surroundings, I have no hesitation in saying that the selection of Washington as the National Capital was one of the greatest mistakes made by the fathers of the Republic. The seat of government ought never to

have been planted there. This, however, is not to be spoken so much in censure as in sorrow.

Beautiful and charming as are the shores of the Potomac, they were not selected as the national seat of government as a matter of absolutely free and deliberate choice. The capital of the nation was, in its infancy, in some sense, a stranger and a sojourner, with no rightful abiding place. It was a bird without a nest, and hardly knew of a region in which to build one. It came to its present location as a pigeon will sometimes light upon a tree, in the absence of a barn; not because it likes it, but because it can do nothing better. That the Capital rested at last upon the shores of the Potomac was due largely to two causes: first, to the bad manners and brutality of a Pennsylvania Militia mob,12 and, secondly, to the potent influence of George Washington.13 By the first it was insulted and driven from Philadelphia; by the second it was invited and lured to its present location.

There was not, at the time when it was chosen; there is not now and probably never will be, entire satisfaction with the location. The arguments against it were political, moral, and social, as well as geographical. Time has in large measure proved the wisdom and soundness of all these objections.

Seemingly a small matter in itself at the time, experience has shown that it contained the seeds of civil war and disunion.

Sandwiched between two of the oldest slave states, each of which was a nursery and a hot-bed of slavery; surrounded by a people accustomed to look upon the youthful members of a colored man's family as a part of the annual crop for the market; pervaded by the manners, morals, politics, and religion peculiar to a slaveholding community, the inhabitants of the National Capital were, from first to last, frantically and fanatically sectional. It was southern in all its sympathies and national only in name. 22 Until the war, it neither tolerated freedom of speech nor of the press. Slavery was its idol, and, like all idol worshippers, its people howled with rage when this ugly idol was called in question.

Like most slaveholding communities, Washington was tolerant of drinking, gambling, sensuality, indolence, and many other forms of vice common to an idle and lounging people. It was the home of the bully and the duelist. A member of Congress, or an editor, who went there from the more industrious and civilized parts of the country, found himself at an immense disadvantage and of small account. He was in an enemy's land, a victim of insult and intimidation, and found that he must either submit to

The Bladensburg dueling grounds. *Courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.*

23 the lash and sting of the most insolent of human tongues or accept a challenge to Bladensburg [Md.] and be shot at by a trained duelist.

If, for any reason, however noble, he refused to submit to the barbarous code of honor, he was branded as a coward and regarded with contempt and scorn by the elite of Washington society.

The place as it was before the war might, without unpardonable freedom of fancy, be painted as a garden worthy of the best productions but mainly choked with poisonous weeds and infested by twisting serpents.

The wealth of Washington was tainted with corruption. Its moral life

William H. Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state. A Brady photograph taken while Seward was convalescing from Payne's attempt on his life. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

James Buchanan, fifteenth president of the United States. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

John C. Breckenridge, senator and congressman from Kentucky. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

Library of Congress

Preston S. Brooks, congressman from South Carolina. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

Charles Sumner, senator from Massachusetts. *Courtesy of the Mathew Brady Collection, Library of Congress.*

Andrew Johnson, seventeenth president of the United States. *Courtesy of the Mathew Brady Collection, Library of Congress.*

24 was a miserable sham. Its industry was the wielding of the lash; its politeness, polished iniquity; its respect for the rights of man was bounded by the white line; its courage was to whip a Negro with his hands tied; its religion was, like all the rest, a soft raiment, fair without, but foul within, worn to cover the festering sores of a diseased and leprous body.

Like any other moral monster, there was contamination in its touch, poison in its breath, and death in its embrace. There was something more than a wild and witty exaggeration in the saying of Senator Brownlow14 when he remarked to a fellow passenger that he must be getting near Washington, for he began to feel as if he wanted to steal something.

The impeachment of Andrew Johnson. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

In fostering and fomenting the late slaveholders' rebellion, Washington performed its full share. It sustained Buchanan15 when he trifled with treason. It applauded Breckenridge16 when he served the rebellion better in the Senate with his tongue then he could possibly serve 25 it in the field with his sword. It stood between President Johnson17 and deserved impeachment and cheered him on in his ministry of disorganization. It smiled upon the cowardly and murderous assault of Brooks upon Senator Sumner.18 It hatched out in its heat and moral debasement the horrible brood of assassins who murdered the noble Lincoln and attempted the murder of Seward.19 Its people would, at any time during the great war for union and liberty, have preferred Davis to Lincoln and Lee to Grant.

Wise, as I have said, after the event, we can now plainly see that to place the capital of a great republic in the midst of such degrading and barbarous tendencies was a grave mistake and a great misfortune.

Here, as elsewhere, the truth has been demonstrated that there must be purity at the fountain or there will be foulness in the stream. If the floor of the Senate has power, the gallery has influence. Wholesome legislation is favored by a good gallery, as well as by a good floor. The good influence that was sent by the country to the floor was often neutralized by the local influence that went to the galleries.

Had the National Capital remained in Philadelphia, upon free soil, amid its loyal and national tendencies; had it breathed the air and heard the peaceful voice of the Society of Friends, instead of the angry clamor of the Washington fire-eaters, some solution of the slave question might have been reached far short of rebellion, bloodshed, and assassination.

It is not easy to ever estimate the influence of the people of the District of Columbia. Aside from American women, they are now the only people of the Republic denied the exercise of the elective franchise.

There has, of late, been much complaint of this discrimination against the people of the District. But the injustice is, as was foreseen by the fathers of the Republic, more seeming than real. No equal part of the American people have today more real power in shaping the destiny of this country than have the people of Washington and the District of Columbia. What they have lost by their exclusion from the ballot box is more than made up to them by their contact with the men who make the laws and administer the government. Legislators, judges, and executive officers naturally enough desire to stand well with their neighbors, and they are seldom so inflexible as not to yield something to accomplish this result.

This neighborhood power of Washington, as already indicated, has played a high hand in directing public affairs heretofore, and may be safely depended upon to secure for the people here ample protection of person and property without the ballot. But who are the people of Washington and of the District of Columbia, the people who have given to the place its peculiar tone and character? The answer is, as already intimated, that they are mainly of the old slaveholding stock of Virginia and Maryland. They were on the ground when the District of Columbia was ceded to the federal government and have been largely increased by additions from the same states. They were in part persons of wealth, 26 culture, and refinement. They had undisputed possession of Washington during the entire existence of the National Capital up to the war to suppress rebellion. They lived in fine houses, rode in fine carriages, had fine old wines in their cellars, and knew how to give fine and sparkling champagne suppers. Judging from the social influence, they were a charming community of gentlemen and ladies. Association with them easily produced an intermediate class, known as northern men with southern principles. The sources of their revenue were slavery and the government. Of Uncle Sam's good things, Virginia and Maryland always got the lion's share.

All this is now considerably changed, and the change has come none too soon. With the suppression of the rebellion and the abolition of slavery, the prestige of Virginia has vanished and her glory has departed. She is no longer the Old Dominion; no longer the mother of living statesmen, and her sons are not preferred above all others. They still deport themselves with an air of dignity; but dignity without station, masters without slaves, lords without land, Honorables without honors, idols without worshippers, shock and repel by reason of contradiction. The old Virginia stock, once so powerful in Washington and in the counsels of the nation, is now a thing of the past, an anachronism, a superstition, a dim and flickering light on the distant and hazy horizon of a fast-declining day!

What are these people like, and how have they been affected by their education, habits, and training? The personal appearance of any class of people is involuntary evidence

given both for and against themselves. Judged by this rule, the old citizens of Washington are certainly quite moderate in their own praise. There are good men and good qualities here as elsewhere. I am dealing in generalities, leaving exceptions to take care of themselves.

As a class, the people of Washington, descendants of the old families, are very easily distinguished from the people of the North, and West, and the East. The difference, however, between them and others, is not so easily described and defined as perceived. It is general rather than special. It is more in dress, gait, conversation, and bearing, than in other personal striking features. It is moral rather than physical and is felt rather than seen. There is a leisurely indolence observable in all their movements. If to be a gentlemen is never to be in a hurry, the native-born Washingtonian is a gentleman. He is never in a hurry. In walking, his gait is slow rather than measured, and his arms dangle rather than swing in orderly union with the motion of his legs and body. In the economy of his life his muscles have had little to do, and disuse has induced a lack of ability and disposition. He has the sitting power of a Turk and may be seen in his easy chair more hours in the day than any other man in America. He generally walks with a cane, often sits toying with a cane, and is seldom seen without a cane. He evidently carries it more as a mark of dignity and as a badge of authority than as a means of support. He 27 carries it as the knights and squires of the olden times wore their swords, more for ornament than for use; more for pride than for profit. His hat is apt to be drawn a little too low down over his eyes to be entirely consistent with manly openness of character. In fact he plainly declares by his whole appearance that he has no sympathy whatever with his present surroundings. He is absorbed in his own thoughts and has the air of a man who wishes neither to observe nor to attract observation. This circumstance gives him a somber and sinister appearance which, I admit, may belong less to his real character than to the peculiar relation he sustains to his present surroundings.

One of the peculiarities of the old Washingtonian families will strike the ears of all educated people from the North. They all have something of the Negro in their speech,

and many of them have it very strong. Even where there is much culture and refinement, there is often in their speech a tinge of the Negro's slovenly pronunciation. Born and reared among Negro slaves, learning their first songs and stories from their lips, they have naturally enough adopted the Negro's manner of using his vocal organs. I gather from this fact the small consolation that, if the blacks are too low to learn from the whites, the whites are not too high to learn from the blacks, and further, that the contact with ignorance promotes ignorance, and the safety of each is found in the freedom and education of all.

But Washington has among its old inhabitants of the old Virginia class, another variety, not less typical of southern civilization than those already described.

They are what are commonly called, by way of extreme contempt, “poor white trash.” They never held an office, never owned a slave, and never called a piece of land their own. They have never aspired to wealth, education, or respectability. In the days of slavery, they touched the master class only at the lowest point of moral and social degradation. They were the slave drivers, the overseers, the slave hunters, the spies, the patrolmen, the informers, the watchdogs of the plantation. They were generally on hand when a refractory Negro was to be beaten with many stripes. To be permitted this luxury of brute enjoyment, they would follow the track of a Negro, as a dog will follow a bone, or a shark will follow a slave ship.

Since slavery has ceased to disgrace the National Capital, and slave-hunting and women-whipping are no longer paying occupations, these men manage to live in a small way by hunting, gunning, fishing, and huckstering. Poor as their mode of living now is, it is a decided improvement, morally and materially, upon that to which they were reduced during the prevalence of slavery. Yet, strange to say, these people are in no degree more happy than formerly. They resent the emancipation of the Negroes and would fight today if, by that means, they could bring back the old slave system. They sigh over the lost cause as sincerely as if they had lost millions by it. The trouble and complaint of 28 these people is not that they themselves have, by this change, fallen lower in the scale of society, but that

the Negro has risen higher. The distance between themselves and the Negro has been diminished; that is all.

Human nature is proud and perverse among the low as well as among the high. A man must be low indeed when he does not want someone below him. If he cannot have an Irishman, he wants a Negro; and if he cannot have a Negro to command, he would like to have a dog! Anything to be above something; but just now these unhappy people see nothing solid below themselves, and, consequently, do not know to what the world is coming.

But I would do injustice in the matter of the population of Washington if I failed to say a word of another element in the social composition of the Capital, in no degree more agreeable and commendable than those already referred to.

They are the spoilsmen of every grade and description. They are the officeholders, officeseekers, contract buyers, pension agents, lobbyists, commissioners, and runbetweens in general. Men are here with all sorts of schemes and enterprises; some with claims valid and just, and some with claims neither valid nor just. Some have to secure the extension of a patent which ought to be extended, and some are here to prevent such extension. Some are here to contest the seat of a sitting member, and some are here to assist him.

Some are here to use their influence for friends at a distance who are too modest or too timid to come themselves; some are here with heads full of brains, pockets full of money, and faces full of brass, to lobby through Congress a great patriotic measure with millions in it; and all are here to get, if possible, something for nothing.

The faces and movements of these men are a study, and the impression they make is far from pleasant. There is, here and there, in the crowd a face of genuine manliness and joy,

but the majority of them are wrinkled, darkened, and distorted by lines that tell of cunning, meanness, and servility. They are restless, eager, and anxious.

Nowhere will you find a greater show of insincere politeness. The very air is vexed with clumsy compliments and obsequious hatlifting.

Everybody wants favor; everybody expects favor; everybody is looking for favor; everybody is afraid of losing favor; hence everybody knows the full value and quality of this general self-abasement. You will seldom hear an honest, square, upright, and downright *no* in all this eager and hungry crowd. All look yes, and smile yes, even when they mean anything else than yes. In their large and well-worn pocketbooks, many of them carry about with them carefully folded but considerably soiled papers, written in a solemn official hand, earnestly recommending the bearer for any office or thing he may want, or he may be able to get; for when the former is impossible, the latter is always acceptable.

It is easy to see, upon slight inspection, that some of these papers are very old and have seen much service, and certify to characters which may 29 have been lost a dozen times since they were written, and thus the biggest rogues may sometimes have the best papers.

The National Capital is never without a fair representation of these hungry spoilsmen, but the incoming of a new administration is the signal for the gathering in force of this remorseless class. The avenues of the city and the corridors of the Capitol and of other public buildings are the literal whirlpools of social driftwood from every section of the Republic.

Its members are met with in all directions. They are crowding, elbowing, and buttonholing, everywhere.

The least offensive of this multitude are those who come here to obtain clerkships and other positions in the several government departments. There is nothing in this service to

degrade or to demoralize, and yet I cannot recommend any young man to seek this mode of livelihood. The process of getting and holding these offices is often both degrading and demoralizing. It plays havoc with manly independence and true self-respect.

They are usually obtained through intervention of members of Congress and other influential persons, for political service rendered or to be rendered, and there is often a strong temptation to resort to improper means to make an impression upon those whose influence is sought for this purpose.

All the dishonesty and duplicity in office-seeking and in the pressing of claims are not on the side of this hungry crowd. The men who serve them, or profess to serve them, are not always sound or what they seem.

A member of Congress has been known to give a confiding constituent a strong letter of recommendation to a position in one of the government departments and then by another street outrun the applicant and say to the department addressed that no attention must be paid to it and that his name was only signed to the letter for buncombe. The apology for this duplicity and treachery is, political necessity. He cannot afford to make a political enemy. He would doubtless very gladly give every voter in his district an office, but the voters are too many and the offices too few. He has two cats in his room and only one mouse in his closet. Hence while he freely signs your papers, he says to the heads of the departments, “Pay no attention to my recommendations unless I personally accompany the applicant!”

In this preeminently deceitful and treacherous atmosphere, promises, even on paper, do not amount to much. Everybody is fed and being fed upon great expectations and golden promises, and, since the diet is less than dog cheap, nobody fails of a full supply.

If you happen to want any office and want help to get it, everybody will cheerfully promise to help you. *Your* member of Congress will do what he can for you, *your* senator will do what he can for you, *your* whole delegation will do what they can for you, and even the

president of the United States, who does not permit himself generally to interfere in the matter of departmental appointment, will do what he can for you.

30

The amazing thing is, however, that with all this gushing and abundant promise to help, your name is not on the payroll; you are still in the cold, and your chances of getting in grow beautifully less, with every dinner your friends will permit you to take at Willard's,20 Wormley's,21 or Welcker's.22

It is commonly thought to be a nice and pleasant thing to be a member of Congress, but I think it would be difficult for a man to find any position more abundant in vexation. A man who gets himself elected to Congress can seldom do so without drawing after him to Washington a lively swarm of political creditors who want their pay in the shape of an office

The Willard Hotel, perhaps the best known of Washington's hotels. *Courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.*

somewhere in the Civil Service. They besiege his house at all hours, night and day, break his bell wires before breakfast, and so crowd his doorway, that, if he is in, he cannot get out without seeing them, and if he is out, he cannot get in without seeing them. They waylay him as he goes to his house and dog him to the very doors and summon him to the cloakroom or lobby after he may have been so fortunate as to have reached his seat in the House of Representatives.

In all this sort of vexation and trouble he must be too polite or too prudent to express the slightest sense of annoyance. If he would be a 31 successful politician he must face it all with blandest suavity and the patience of a true martyr.

But members of Congress are not the only victims of this incessant, persistent, and annoying importunity for help to get official positions. The hour a man takes up his abode in Washington, his relation to the administration is inquired into and ascertained. No

neutrality is allowed him. He is instantly weighed, measured, and stamped, and duly assigned to one of two classes: the class which is used by everybody or the class that uses everybody.

Once let it get abroad that you are friendly to the administration, or

Frederick Douglass with his family, standing in front of their home at 316 Street, N.E. They lived in this house until 1877, when they moved to Cedar Hill in the Anacostia section of southeast Washington. *Courtesy of the Museum of African Art and the Frederick Douglass Institute.*

James Wormley, a black man, owner of Wormley House, one of the best hotels in the Washington of Douglass's time. It was at this hotel that the “Wormley House Bargain” was struck, which assured the election of Rutherford B. Hayes as president of the United States in the disputed election of 1876. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

32 worse still, that the administration is friendly to you, and you will at once find yourself a famous man. Smiling faces anxious to see you and to serve their country will cluster and whirl about your pathway, like the ripe leaves of declining autumn. If you were never before aware of your greatness, you will be made aware of it now, as plain as words can reveal it. Men will tell you of it oftener than you can muster face to hear it. You will be urged to sign papers, write letters, and go in person and urge the appointment of some one of your numerous friends and admirers, every day in the year, and if you do not *sign, write,* and *go,* you will be denounced as a cold and heartless man.

I have had, since residing in Washington,23 my full share of this kind of service. I am usually approached by the dark side of our fellow citizens. They have been told by somebody, somewhere, that if they can only get to Washington and find Douglass, they will be quite sure to get an office.

When white men wish my aid they tell me wonderful things of what they or their fathers did in the abolition cause, when it cost something to be known as an abolitionist. Through this

class I have learned that there were a great many more Underground Railroad Stations at the North than I ever dreamed of in the time of slavery and when I sorely needed one myself.

Just what becomes of this ever-accumulating and ever-dissolving cloud of place hunters, I cannot engage to tell.

Like the mist and spray which rises over the cataract of Niagara, its particles are ever meeting and separating in the air. One goes, another comes, and none stay long. Few are successful in getting what they seek. There are a hundred applicants for every ten vacancies. The demand is incomparably greater than the supply, and the cry is “Still they come.”

But what shall be said of the middlemen, the lawyers, the claim agents, the office brokers, the commissioners, and the professional lobbyists who infest the seat of the national government and help to make its reputation for good or for evil, as the case may be?

Many of these men have been clerks and other officers in the various departments of the government. They know the wires to pull, the springs to touch, and the power to apply, and when, where, and how. They are a priesthood standing between the simple, the uninitiated, and the solemn altars of the vast marble temples of the various departments. Their ways and words are dark, sinuous, and mysterious. They know everything and stand ready, for a proper consideration, to advise you just how to go to work upon any little or big job which you may wish to accomplish. Like most priesthoods, they are exposed to many and severe temptations. If a man comes to Washington and thinks he has a valid claim and a clear case against the government and is willing to pay handsomely to gain it, it is hard for a claim agent to refuse to make an effort, although he may know that the effort will be in vain. As a general rule, he does not resist the temptation and very likely satisfies the little conscience his business leaves him by the common reflection that if he does not mislead and 33 fleece the simple, somebody else, in the line of his profession, will.

I have already said that the people of Washington have no claim to superiority in the matter of material civilization. The evidence in support of this assertion is found in the evident neglect with which they have treated their natural advantages and opportunities for improvement.

A man may not be blamed because he cannot grow bananas in Greenland and export ice from the tropics, but he may cooperate with nature in what she favors north or south.

With only a moderate degree of enterprise, energy, and industry, the shores of the Potomac might have rivaled the shores of the Delaware and the Hudson. Coal, iron, and labor in abundance are at command, and Washington might easily have been made to listen to the hum and din of business and have become a seat of commerce and manufacture. But she has rejected her natural sources of wealth, progress, and prosperity and allowed her noble river to run almost useless to the sea. The river is good, the climate is good, the country and the general surroundings are good. The people alone are at fault.

A few small crafts toiling or drifting through the Long Bridge and loaded with Cumberland coal; a few smaller ones bringing oysters in winter, and green vegetables in summer, with here and there a little steamer winding its solitary way up and down, touching at houseless and noiseless landings along its desolate shores, are about all that the beautiful and broad Potomac has been made to serve for navigation and commerce. Her borders, which ought to be alive with the hum and din of business and lined on either side with thriving villages, are about as silent as the figure upon the iron dome of the Capitol. Outside of the city of Washington there is, perhaps, no city in the United States, where the lands along a navigable river front are not more valuable than those lying back and remote from it. Such is the singularity of Washington.

Two causes must explain the destitution of energy, enterprise, and industry which have made this fact possible:

1st. the presence and natural influence of slavery;

2d. the overshadowing presence and example of the government.

Slavery has left a desiduum in Washington which for the want of a better name, I call “the black boy.” Its influence seems to be in the air. And few who reside for any length of time in the Capital escape it. Everybody is waited upon by the black boy, and everybody wants the black boy to wait upon him. Age and size furnish no criterion as to the appropriateness of the name. The black boy may be old or young, large or small, tall or short, seven years or seventy years old, he is always, according to the parlance of slavery, the black boy. Send for a mechanic to put a shingle on your roof; a plumber to mend your water pipe, or your gas pipe; or send to anybody else to do the smallest piece of work, and at his heels you will find the inevitable black boy. He is there to carry the tools, to tote the water, and to otherwise wait and tend on the *Boss.*

When the wife of the humble mechanic in Washington goes to do her 34 marketing, if only to buy a single head of cabbage or a half a peck of potatoes, like all the rest she must have a black boy walk behind her and carry the basket. In some cases the black boy might, by an oriental, be mistaken for an object of worship, and he might be led to suspect that the people have placed those objects at their front doors for adoration.

But the iron black boy at the front door of a Washington gentleman is not there for religious purposes. He is simply planted there as a hitching post for horses. In these black, ragged, iron images, barefooted and bareheaded, with one suspender over the shoulder, after the manner of the black boy in slavery, we must see the kind of Christian civilization which has flourished here. Next to the degradation of labor by slavery and the consequent discouragement of industry stand [illegible] the example and influence as illustrated in these figures.

Library of Congress

Government departments are also a standing temptation to win men from labor and industry. At three o'clock in the afternoon of the long summer's day, a multitude of well-dressed young gentlemen are seen emerging from the majestic marble structures known as the departments. These young men look like the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin. They have worked six hours and their day's work is done.

Now a young man who comes here to engage in some industrial pursuit and to begin the business of life must be well stocked with energy, industry, and manly ambition, if he is able to resist the desire to be arrayed like one of these, and ten chances to one, he does not resist. He compares his lot with that of the clerks and other officers in the department, measures his ten hours of labor with their six, and finds his just four hours too long. Besides, the clerks are clean; he is soiled; the clerks look fresh and he is tired. He is disgusted by the contrast; sighs and seeks for office, and, if he succeeds, that is about the last of him for any useful business or calling in the world. Men are worked upon by what they work upon, and when once a man finds himself fitted to a desk and stool, and becomes rooted and grounded into the routine of a Government Clerk, he is seldom fitted for anything else in life.

Though slavery has now disappeared from Washington, and disappeared forever, its footprints are yet visible and deep, and will long remain so. They are seen here in the general exercise of force and cruelty. It is amazing how much is done with the whip in the spirit of slavery: At the Capital, none persuade; all drive.

The Negro is no exception to the rule. In whatever else he may have failed to learn from the old master class, he has not failed to learn their cruelty.

Woe to the horse, the ox, the mule, or the boy, where he is master. Having been a subject of the lash himself, he might be supposed to abhor it; but, on the contrary, he now believes in it, and is even fanatical in his faith. He has never known any other way.

You may see him here with his team all the way from Prince George's County, and wherever you see him, he is bent upon making a sensation. 35 The crack of his long whip is like the report of a Colt's revolver. He is as noisily free with his husky voice and terrible lash in the streets and avenues of Washington as he would be while fording a stream a dozen miles from a human habitation; and, strange to say, no one here seems to be shocked, either by the unseemly noise or by the cruelty.

The outfit is one that can only be seen in a land of slavery. It belongs to a bygone age and bygone civilization. It is an odd-shaped, left-handed, knock-kneed, wobbling concern; a cross between a one-horse cart and a two-horse lumber wagon; drawn by two bony horses, two vicious-looking mules, and accompanied by the colored brother with the long whip and husky voice.

The wagon contains two lean lank-sided hogsheads of tobacco, a litter of fodder for the animals, and a large brown jug. The horses and mules have cornhusks for collars, bed cords for bridle reins, knotted ropes for traces, and sheepskins for saddles; and the inevitable jug has a corncob for a cork. The wagon that came here full goes away empty, and the jug that came here empty goes away full, and the man who comes here sober goes away drunk.

I now turn from the past with its gloom to the present with its promise, and to the future with its glory.

I have already spoken of the great change which has taken place in the physical condition of Washington. The change in its moral condition is equally vast and wonderful.

Men breathe freer here than ever they did before. Northern men with northern principles may now speak and write without the liability of being knocked down by street bullies and hired assassins, as in the time of slavery. The Senate is no longer a theater of threats and brutal intimidation.

Library of Congress

The colored people of Washington constitute one third of its population, and the change in their condition is truly marvelous. Some of the school buildings erected for the education of their children would do no discredit to the finest towns and cities of the North, and the freedom from annoyance with which these children are allowed to go and come from school, with their books and slates in their hands, is one of the most encouraging features of the times.

Washington, from being one of the most oppressive and illiberal cities of the Union toward the colored race, has now become one of the most enlightened and liberal to the race. A colored man may now go to market or attend church or funeral without a written permit from master or mayor. He is no longer arrested for being a stranger and sold out of prison to pay his jail fees.

The moral tone of Washington has likewise been improved in many other respects.

Under the old dispensation, when slavery ruled and ruined, Washington was not a desirable place of residence for the wives and daughters of members of Congress and others whose business or pleasure 36 took them thither. Gentlemen came here alone and lived here alone.

In the absence of good women and the family, man sinks rapidly to barbarism. In the old times, members of Congress came here and left behind them all the restraints and endearments of home. Their manners and morals were shaped by those of the restaurant, the hotel, and the gambling hall, and other resorts of men of the world.

But now, thanks to the abolition of slavery, thanks to the increasing influence and power of the North, thanks to the spirit of improvement, thanks to the increase of cheap and easy modes of travel, members of Congress and other who have business at the Capital can bring their

Library of Congress

Hillsdale School was the first public school for black children in the Anacostia section of Washington. Built in 1871, it stood at the intersection of Nichols (now Martin Luther King, Jr.) Avenue and Sheridan Road, S.E. *Courtesy of the Washingtoniana Collection, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library.*

37 families with them and surround themselves with all the restraints and endearments of home.

I do not pretend to say that Washington is at all perfect. There is of course within her borders a full share of vice and crime of every conceivable kind and quality, but I do mean to say that there is now much less of these, in proportion to numbers, than under the old regime, and that this is especially true in respect of the influential classes.

Washington is still, and, in the nature of things, must continue to be, a city of boardinghouses and hotels; but it is also rapidly becoming a city of sweet and beautiful homes. All signs indicate that the National Capital

The Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, located on Pennsylvania Avenue at Fifteenth Street, N.W., opposite the Treasury Building. In 1874, in an effort to stave off collapse, the bank appointed Frederick Douglass as its president. It had been chartered by Congress in order to encourage blacks to save money. The bank was incompetently managed, though; through no fault of Douglass's, it closed several months after he was named president. *Courtesy of the National Archives.*

38 will ultimately become one of the most desirable cities for residence, in the world.

The delightful mildness of its winters; the grace, elegance, beauty, and captivating power of its presidential and other receptions; the increasing attractions to wealth, art, and science afforded by it; the eloquent debates in Congress, will draw men of thought, taste, leisure, and refinement, as well as men and women of fashion, to the National Capital for permanent residence.

The beautiful hills around it, so long neglected, will in time be occupied like those of Boston and other great American cities.

Lincoln Hall, built in 1869 and located at Ninth and D Streets, N.W., was one of the most impressive new buildings in the Washington of Douglass's time. *Courtesy of Robert Truax/ Columbia Historical Society.*

39

One word about Congress; for to speak of Washington without speaking of Congress is like speaking of the body and saying nothing of the soul; like studying the garment and not the person; Congress is the light and life of Washington and the true index to the character and mental resources of the nation.

Whether we look down upon the orderly confusion of the House of Representatives, or upon the stately dignity and decorum of the Senate, we see, as in a mirror, the image of the Republic with all its virtues and vices, its beauties and deformities, its wisdom and its follies, with the age and body of our times. It is a grand place to read and study the American people.

An interior view of Lincoln Hall. *Courtesy of Robert Truax/Columbia Historical Society.*

40

A very brief acquaintance will convince one that Congress is not the place for either a vain man or a weak man. He may be a very great man at home and a very small man in Congress. it is one thing to be weighed and measured by one's friends, neighbors, and admirers, but quite another thing to be measured in comparison with the chosen representatives of forty millions of people. In this presence your weak man will easily sink to nothingness, and your vain man, if not hopelessly blind and insensible, will have his vanity completely taken out of him. He will be allowed to pass in a crowd but will find no admiring eyes feasting upon his fine face, his fine figure, or his fine clothing. The people there gathered are accustomed to hear and see great men. They are experts: they know at

a glance the genuine from the spurious, the false from the true, the sheet-iron thunder of the stage from the royal thunder of heaven.

The former Corcoran Gallery (today the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution), at the corner of Seventeenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. It was built in 1870 by William Wilson Corcoran, a Washington banker and art patron, to house his collection of paintings and sculptures. *Courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.*

Whatever may be the faults of our representative system, the fault of sending weak and vain men to Congress is not very prominent among 41 them. Occasionally one, by means of money or of an artificial reputation, gets himself elected, but his race is generally short and far from glorious, and he gets leave to stay at home with ready and amazing unanimity.

The question is often asked, “How does the Congress of today, as a legislative body, compare with the Congress as it was in the earlier days of the Republic?”

In answer, I say at once, but not without reflection, that I have no sympathy with the cant and superstition which accords all the greatness, wisdom, eloquence, and statesmanship to the past and is perpetually mourning over the departed glory of the American Senate and House.

There is reason to believe that the men of our times are about as good and great as were the men of any time in the life of the Republic.

Congress has, during the last ten or fifteen years, been called upon to meet and dispose of questions which required as much nerve, wisdom, and statesmanship as any in the course of the earlier history of the Republic. In my judgment, these questions have been met and disposed of as wisely and as firmly by the statesmen of today as they would have been by those of the first half century.

Here as elsewhere, distance lends enchantment to the view. There is in human nature a weakness, akin to sentiment, that sighs for the good old times. “Speak nought but good of the dead” is that which posits all bad with the present. The assumption of superiority of the past over the present is against fact, law, and experience, and is usually born of disappointment and discontent.

An impartial reading of the speeches made in the American Senate during the last decade, side by side with those made by Clay, Calhoun, Webster, and Benton,24 will show that the former are in all respects quite equal to the latter.

The trouble is in our standard of judgment. If the Conklings,25 the Mortons,26 the Thurmans,27 and Bayards,28 do not seem as tall as their predecessors in the American Senate, it is not because they have fallen lower, but because the people have risen higher and view these statesmen from a loftier altitude. We stand further from monarchical man-worship now than we did thirty years ago. The distance between the people and their leaders can never be so great in a republic as in a monarchy.

There has been of late much talk of the removal of the National Capital to some point further west and nearer to our geographical center than Washington.

The possibility of some such removal has possibly done something against its prosperity and improvement, for why expend money and adorn the city if we are soon to desert it?

It does not appear at all probable that the American people can in any conceivable circumstances be brought to do so unwise a thing as would be the removal of the National Capital. Fond of change and restless as the American people are, they are nevertheless very practical withal, and are generally willing to let well enough alone. While the affairs of the nation 42 flow along smoothly in their ordinary channels; while the country is at peace at home and at peace abroad; while no great public danger threatens from any quarter, the argument for keeping the National Capital where it is will be much stronger than any

which can be brought in favor of removal. Here as elsewhere, possession is nine points of the law. The right of the Capital to its present location has been established by peaceful occupation during seventy years. Great convulsions in nature or in society may shake it, but, without wars, revolutions, or earthquakes, the National Capital may be depended upon to remain in Washington.

Its right to remain here is defended by all the forces and appliances of

Allen Granberry Thurman, congressman and senator from Ohio. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*

43 modern civilization. Steam and lightning have overcome and put to silence all arguments based upon time and space.

Besides, great cities, like other great institutions, have within themselves a powerful tendency to create conditions favorable to their own permanence. The magnificent public buildings, the Capitol, the buildings equal to those of nations which count their years by thousands; Interior, the Post Office, and the State Department buildings which have been the result of long years of labor, and hundreds of millions of money; all speak eloquently for permanence. Every stone in the massive marble and granite walls cry out, trumpet tongued, against the expense and folly of removal.

The former State, War, and Navy Building, now known as the Executive Office Building, at Seventeenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. The southern section of the building, seen here in the foreground, was finished in 1875 and housed the State Department. *Courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.*

There are every-increasing moral as well as material conditions tending to fix and fasten the Capital where it is. It is a great place and great things have been done in it, and every such circumstance serves by association to rivet the Capital where it is and to weaken the disposition to remove it elsewhere.

But strong and immovable as are its present foundations, mighty as are the considerations and associations which bind it where it is, I would rather, you would rather, and every friend of human liberty would rather, welcome its destruction by revolution, whirlwind, or earthquake, than to see it again the hot-bed of slavery, treason, and assassination. Better that there should not be here one stone left upon another, and that its ruins be given to the bats and owls, than that it should again take its ancient character and office in American affairs.

But no such condition of things can await our National Capital. Where it is and what it is, and what it promises to be, let it stand, now and forever. In its present character, no capital in the world has or can have a higher and more beneficent mission. While it stands, there is a chance for the spread of freedom and free institutions in the world, for while it stands, it is a sign of the permanence and success of the Republic. No longer sandwiched between two slave states; no longer a standing contradiction to the spirit of progress and to the civilization of the age; no longer isolated from the outside world and dependent upon a single railroad; no longer the hot-bed of slavery and the infernal slave trade; no longer the enemy of free speech and a free press; no longer the patron of the Bowie knife, the pistol, and the bully; no longer a place shunned by human[e] men and upright women; no longer the frantic party of one section against another; no longer anchored to a barbarous past in which the footsteps of men are marked with blood; Washington may not only become one of the most beautiful and attractive cities in the world, but one of the grandest agents in the work of spreading peace on earth and good will toward men.

In its grandeur and significance, it may be a sign and a bond of the American Union, a pledge of the righteousness that exalts a nation, a place where the best men and the best women from all sections of our widely extended country shall delight to meet and bury their differences, renew their covenants of patriotism, and shake hands, not over a bloody chasm, but over a free, prosperous, happy, and progressive REPUBLIC.

Notes

1. Henry Clay (1777–1852) was a congressman and senator from Kentucky and served as secretary of state under John Quincy Adams.

2. John Caldwell Calhoun (1782–1850) was a congressman and senator from South Carolina and served as secretary of war under Monroe, vice president under Jackson, and secretary of state under Tyler.

3. Daniel Webster (1782–1852) served as a congressmen from New Hampshire and a senator from Massachusetts and was secretary of state under Presidents Harrison, Tyler, and Fillmore.

4. Horace Greeley (1811–1872) was an American political leader and editor of the *New York Tribune.* In 1871 he published a book entitled *What I Know of Farming.*

5. Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) was a landscape architect who designed the Capitol grounds in 1874. Among his other commissions was New York City's Central Park.

6. Work on the Washington Monument was suspended in 1855 for lack of funds. Construction began again in 1878, and the monument was dedicated in 1885.

7. Robert Charles Winthrop (1809–1894) was a representative and senator from Massachusetts.

8. This is a famous statement made by Stephen Decatur (1779–1820), a naval hero in the War of 1812. He was killed in a duel at Bladensburg, Md. (See Douglass's reference to dueling at Bladensburg, p. 23.)

Library of Congress

9. Fought in Virginia in 1864, the Wilderness Campaign was one of the most protracted and destructive campaigns of the Civil War.

10. “On to Richmond!” was the rallying cry of Union forces early in the Civil War.

11. Daniel Webster delivered an address at the dedication of the Bunker Hill Monument on July 17, 1842.

12. After the Revolutionary War, the capital had been located in Philadelphia. When a group of unpaid war veterans threatened Congress, local authorities, concerned only with local matters, refused to offer protection. Their refusal led to a renewed demand that the federal government be situated in its own city.

13. George Washington played a crucial role in the creation of the city of Washington. He appointed its first three commissioners and named Andrew Ellicott as its surveyor. Ellicott, with the help of Benjamin Banneker, a black man, drew up the first map of the city, along lines that had been proposed by Washington.

14. William Gannaway Brownlow (1805–1877) served as governor of Tennessee and was later a senator from that state. The last legislation he introduced as a senator was for the purchase of a site for Fisk University.

15. James Buchanan (1791–1868) was the fifteenth president of the United States. When Douglass said he “trifled with treason,” he may have had in mind Buchanan's desire to placate the southern secessionists.

16. John Cabell Breckenridge (1821–1875) was congressman and senator from Kentucky and served as vice president under James Buchanan. As a senator, he opposed Lincoln's war policies.

17. Andrew Johnson (1808–1875) was the seventeenth president of the United States. Contrary to what Douglass says, Johnson was impeached by the House of Representatives, in 1868; he was tried in the Senate and acquitted by one vote.

18. Charles Sumner (1811–1874) was a senator from Massachusetts. An outspoken opponent of slavery, on May 20, 1856, Sumner furiously denounced the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which permitted slavery in those two territories. Two days later, in the Senate chamber, he was attacked by Preston S. Brooks (1819–1857), a congressman from South Carolina, who beat Sumner severely with a walking-stick.

19. William Henry Seward (1801–1872) was Lincoln's secretary of state. Lewis Payne, one of John Wilkes Booth's co-conspirators, made an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Seward the same night on which Lincoln was shot, April 14, 1865.

20. The Willard Hotel, at Pennsylvania Avenue and Fourteenth Street, N.W., was one of the most famous hotels in Washington.

21. The Wormley House hotel, at Fifteenth and H Streets, N.W., was a Washington landmark. It was established in 1871 by James Wormley (1819–1884), a black man.

22. Welcker's Restaurant was located on Fifteenth Street, between H Street and New York Avenue.

23. The Douglass family moved to Washington in 1872.

24. Thomas Hart Benton (1782–1858) was a congressman and senator from North Carolina.

25. Roscoe Conkling (1829–1888) was a congressman and senator from New York.

26. Oliver Perry Morton (1823–1877) served as governor of Indiana and was later elected senator from that state.

27. Allen Granberry Thurman (1813–1895) was a representative and senator from Ohio.

28. Thomas Francis Bayard (1828–1898) was a senator from Delaware and served as secretary of state and later as ambassador to Great Britain under President Grover Cleveland.

APPENDIX A *Paragraphs Deleted by Douglass*

In the typescript of the lecture appear the following three paragraphs, which Douglass later deleted. They occur at the beginning of the speech and concern the unfortunate orator who spoke before the Boston audience:

One of the most distressing features of this affair was that the speaker himself had no valid excuse for his palpable failure. He could not make the fashionable plea of ill health, for his robust appearance would have contradicted his words. He could not put the blame upon his bronchial tubes, for his voice was strong and rang through the vast hall like a trumpet. He could not plead a want of time for preparation; he had had all summer. In fact he had only his own rashness and folly to blame and like other offenders of this kind was compelled to admit that his punishment was just.

The morning paper purchased of a noisy newsboy at the station, just as he was leaving Boston for new fields of glory, added the last drop to his oratorical sorrows. Instead of giving him a splendid puff, a column report, and sending him on his way rejoicing, it simply dismissed him with less than six lines, the substance of which was that Frederick Douglass, the well-known colored lecturer, ought to have known better than to have attempted to lecture upon such a subject in Boston.

Since this bit of bitter experience I have learned wisdom, and in seeking a subject I sternly refused to meddle with foreign affairs and have scrupulously shunned the classic shades of antiquity.

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APPENDIX B *Reactions to Douglass's Lecture*

Frederick Douglass delivered his "Lecture on Our National Capital" on May 8, 1877, in Baltimore. A summary of the speech was printed in the Baltimore Gazette on May 9, and on May 10 the same summary was reprinted in the Washington Evening Star.

Reaction to the speech was immediate, and strong. A cry went up to remove Douglass from his office as U.S. Marshal of the District of Columbia, a position he had been appointed to by President Hayes on March 18, 1877. Here is a typical response, which appeared in The Evening Star *on May* 26, 1877:

Mr. Horace White writes to the Chicago Tribune as follows concerning the National Capital in the spring of 1877:

Fred. Douglass' lecture on Washington and its inhabitants must be pronounced, in view of his official position, a painful departure from good taste, and a breach of public decorum. Undoubtedly it contains a great deal of truth, spiced with some exaggeration. A three-years' residence at the National Capital during the war enables me to admit that Mr. Douglass has found all the raw spots, and has worked on them with the skill of an artist;

but what would the press and people of Chicago do if the newly appointed marshal of the United States District Court should go to Milwaukee and deliver a lecture containing all the bad things that could possibly be said about Chicago, or raked up to her discredit during the past quarter of a century? They would undoubtedly make every exertion to have him removed from office, and would probably succeed, because the President would hardly overlook so gratuitous a scandal.

Douglass mentions the controversy stirred up by his speech in his autobiography Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. *He writes of the unsuccessful attempt that had been made to stop his confirmation by the Senate as U.S. Marshal and goes on to say:*

The effort to prevent my confirmation having failed, nothing could be done but to wait for some overt act to justify my removal, and for this my *unfriends* had not long to wait. In the course of one or two months I was invited by a number of citizens of Baltimore to deliver a lecture in that city, in Douglass Hall—a building named in honor of myself, and devoted to educational purposes. With this invitation I complied, giving the same lecture which I had 52 two years before delivered in the city of Washington, and which was at the time published in full in the newspapers, and very highly commended by them. The subject of the lecture was, “Our National Capital,” and in it I said many complimentary things of the city, which were as true as they were complimentary. I spoke of what it had been in the past, what it was at that time, and what I thought it destined to become in the future, giving it all credit for its good points, and calling attention to some of its ridiculous features. For this I got myself pretty roughly handled. The newspapers worked themselves up to a frenzy of passion, and committees were appointed to procure names to a petition to President Hayes demanding my removal. The tide of popular feeling was so violent, that I deemed it necessary to depart from my usual custom when assailed, so far as to write the following explanatory letter, from which the reader will be able to measure the extent and quality of my offense:

To the Editor of the Washington *Evening Star:*

Sir: You were mistaken in representing me as being off on a lecturing tour, and, by implication, neglecting my duties as United States Marshal of the District of Columbia. My absence from Washington during two days was due to an invitation by the managers to be present on the occasion of the inauguration of the International Exhibition in Philadelphia.

In complying with this invitation, I found myself in company with other members of the government who went thither in obedience to the call of patriotism and civilization. No one interest of the Marshal's office suffered by my temporary absence, as I had seen to it that those upon whom the duties of the office devolved were honest, capable, industrious, painstaking, and faithful. My Deputy Marshal is a man every way qualified for his position, and the citizens of Washington may rest assured that no unfaithful man will be retained in any position under me. Of course I can have nothing to say as to my own fitness for the position I hold. You have a right to say what you please on that point, yet I think it would be only fair and generous to wait for some dereliction of duty on my part before I shall be adjudged as incompetent to fill the place.

You will allow me to say also that the attacks upon me on account of the remarks alleged to have been made by me in Baltimore strike me as both malicious and silly. Washington is a great city, not a village nor a hamlet, but the capital of a great nation, and the manners and habits of its various classes are proper subjects for presentation and criticism, and I very much mistake if this great city can be thrown into a tempest of passion by any humorous reflections I may take the liberty to utter. The city is too great to be small, and I think it will laugh at the ridiculous attempt to rouse it to a point of furious hostility to me for anything said in my Baltimore lecture.

Had the reporters of the lecture been as careful to note what I said in praise of Washington as what I said, if you please, in disparagement of it, it would have been impossible to awaken any feeling against me in this community for what I said. It is the easiest thing in the world, as all editors know, to pervert the meaning and give a one-sided impression of a whole speech by simply giving isolated passages from the speech itself, without any

qualifying connections. It would hardly be imagined from anything that has appeared here that I had said one word in that lecture in honor of Washington, and yet the lecture itself, as a whole, was directly in the interest of the national capital. I am not such a fool as to decry a city in which I have invested my money and made my permanent residence.

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After speaking of the power of the sentiment of patriotism I held this language: “In the spirit of this noble sentiment I would have the American people view the national capital. It is our national center. It belongs to us, and whether it is mean or majestic, whether arrayed in glory or covered with shame, we cannot but share its character and its destiny. In the remotest section of the Republic, in the most distant parts of the globe, amid the splendors of Europe or the wilds of Africa, we are still held and firmly bound to this common center. Under the shadow of Bunker Hill monument, in the peerless eloquence of his diction, I once heard the great Daniel Webster give welcome to all American citizens, assuring them that wherever else they might be strangers, they were all at home there. The same boundless welcome is given to all American citizens by Washington. Elsewhere we may belong to individual states, but here we belong to the whole United States. Elsewhere we may belong to a section, but here we belong to a whole country, and the whole country belongs to us. It is national territory, and the one place where no American is an intruder or a carpetbagger. The newcomer is not less at home than the old resident. Under its lofty domes and stately pillars, as under the broad blue sky, all races and colors of men stand upon a footing of common equality.

“The wealth and magnificence which elsewhere might oppress the humble citizen has an opposite effect here. They are felt to be a part of himself and serve to ennoble him in his own eyes. He is an owner of the marble grandeur which he beholds about him—as much so as any of the forty millions of this great nation. Once in his life every American who can should visit Washington—not as the Mohametan to Mecca, not as the Catholic to Rome, not as the Hebrew to Jerusalem, nor as the Chinaman to the Flowery Kingdom,

but in the spirit of enlightened patriotism, knowing the value of free institutions and how to perpetuate and maintain them.

“Washington should be contemplated not merely as an assemblage of fine buildings, not merely as the chosen resort of the wealth and fashion of the country, not merely as the honored place where statesmen of the nation assemble to shape the policy and frame the laws, not merely as the point at which we are most visibly touched by the outside world, and where the diplomatic skill and talent of the old continent meet and match themselves against those of the new, but as the national flag itself—a glorious symbol of civil and religious liberty, leading the world in the race of social science, civilization, and renown.”

My lecture in Baltimore required more than an hour and a half for its delivery, and every intelligent reader will see the difficulty of doing justice to such a speech when it is abbreviated and compressed into a half or three-quarters of a column. Such abbreviation and condensation has been resorted to in this instance. A few stray sentences, culled out from their connections, would be deprived of much of their harshness if presented in the form and connection in which they were uttered, but I am taking up too much space, and will close with the last paragraph of the lecture, as delivered in Baltimore. “No city in the broad world has a higher or more beneficient mission. Among all the great capitals of the world it is preeminently the capital of free institutions. Its fall would be a blow to freedom and progress throughout the world. Let it stand where it does now stand—where the father of his country planted it, and where it has stood for more than half a century—no longer sandwiched between two slave states—no longer a contradiction to human progress—no longer the hotbed of slavery 54 and the slave trade—no longer the home of the duelist, the gambler, and the assassin—no longer the frantic partisan of one section of the country against the other—no longer anchored to a dark and semibarbarous past, but a redeemed city, beautiful to the eye and attractive to the heart, a bond of perpetual union, an angel of peace on earth and good will to men, a common ground upon which Americans of all

races and colors, all sections, North and South, may meet and shake hands, not over a chasm of blood, but over a free, united, and progressive republic."

Douglass is quoting here from a slightly different version of the "Lecture." The ideas and sentiments expressed in the two versions are the same, though. Like so many of Douglass's views, they were powerful enough to challenge and upset many of his contemporaries.

Some people came to Douglass's defense. The following editorial in support of Douglass appeared in The New York Times *on June 1, 1877. It proves how effectively Douglass had, once again, forced his audience (and his readers) to take sides.*

Quiet in Washington

At last there is silence among the Little Pedlingtonians of Washington. The outraged citizens of that large village have ceased to murmur or complain that the Marshal of the District of Columbia has said what he thought about them. Only a little while ago, the entire community was in an uproar. A man who was not only black, but who was born in bondage, had been appointed Marshal of the District. Worse than this, he had a public lecture, said some things about Washington which everybody knew to be true. If these had not been true, perhaps nobody would have cared. They have been said about Washington a great many times before, but never by a man whose skin was dark-colored, and who had been appointed to office in the District.

Unhappily, the basis of agreement of which Mr. Douglass formed a part was already accepted by one "Conservative" element of Washington. His remarks, therefore, were calculated to "revive the old war feelings," and reopen the chasm which had been closed by several citizens going on his bond. The faithlessness of this act will be seen at a glance. When a class of men consent to let bygones be bygones, every consideration should be shown their tender feelings. If they have consented to receive a colored office-holder, after due protest, as a man and a brother, it stands to reason that he ought to walk

very softly before them. He is, in a manner, on probation. But the conduct of this dark-skinned official was simply monstrous. If he had been white, and free-born, he could not have affected greater independence of manner. He actually said just what he thought, and, what was worse, he admitted that he had said it before he was an accepted compromise. It was clear that he did not realize his position as a national olive branch and a token of reconciliation.

The clamor which all this created was natural. Washington is not a great city, though its distances are magnificent. Any event which affects its people is a subject of agitated comment. Like other places which are not large, it has its prejudices. There are ladies living in Washington who will not ride in the street cars because they do not drive up the sidewalk at the wave of a parasol, as the omnibuses used to do; and there are others who utterly despise cooking-stoves 55 and kitchen ranges as pestilent Yankee inventions. Even Boston, liberal and cosmopolitan as that city notoriously is, sometimes cries out with disdainful rage when assailed in its social or corporate management. But Boston never could have made the pother over an unfriendly criticism which Washington did. It is too large a city. And it would be quite useless for us to attempt to explain to a New Yorker how badly the Washingtonians felt when Mr. Douglass reminded them that they were rebels and slave dealers in the prehistoric ages. If they had had the undoing of the compromise of which he formed a part, it is safe to say that he would have been “bounced,” ere set of sun. “Withdraw Douglass and send back the troops!” they were ready to cry. But this was not possible. So they got up indignation meetings, and circulated petitions asking the President to remove this bad man. It was Little Pedlington over again.

But when these inflamed people grew cool, they repented them of their haste. They are not encouraging immigration, or bidding for a county seat, that every little squib about them should be put under a microscope and scrutinized. They got up in the morning and found the Capitol still in its place, as it was in those dark times when David Dudlay Field used to sit up nights to watch the flag on the roof. There was the Washington monument still begging its way to the skies; and there, too, was the bronze Jackson sawing the air

with his cocked hat. Nothing was changed, and the rapacious Washington inn-keeper devoured his daily stranger with undiminished appetite. But there were the petitions asking the President to assist in making Washington appear as much as possible like Little Pedlington. It was a happy thought for some good citizen to collect those petitions and quietly destroy them. And that is the end of the matter. The wounded pride of the National Capital has been appeased. The gossips have said their say. Their indignation has been duly trumpeted throughout the Republic. The compromise is once more accepted, and all is quiet on the Potomac.

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